

## Star Wars

### Wizard's RPG Stories

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#### Marching Orders

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Eventually, all wars arrive at one terrible truth - - they need soldiers to fight and more soldiers to replace the fallen. Once this occurs, war becomes less an exercise in morality or righteousness and more a constantly churning grinder mashing the best of a generation into dust beneath its terrible gears. Across the known galaxy, the Clone Wars have become this beast; most now fight because the constant combat is all they know.

Tragically, inevitably, this beast slouches toward Cularin. Its blood-rimmed eye looks toward the Jedi that defend that system and the world's valuable resources. The inhabitants of this once-independent system must quickly realize that only two options remain: fight or die.

"This isn't right!" Even from her infirmary bed, still recovering from the surgical replacement of her ruined arm, Master Devan's fierce beliefs could not remain silent. "What you are doing here is wrong!"

Master Jeht gazed down at her from his vantage point in doorway to her room. Dressed completely in ashen grays and black, even his light Jedi combat armor was the color of a starless night sky. Pulling on battle gloves, he shook his head and stared impassively. "It isn't wrong. It is what the Council has ordered us to do."

"Poo doo!" And as her temper flared, the nearby tray of ignored food began to rattle on its rolling table.

Jeht made a gesture and it fell still. "You need to watch your emotions, Master Devan." His eyes grew even darker, quite a striking expression given their already total lack of color. "Trust me; you don't want to let your anger get the better of you."

She glared at him, only relenting because he was right. "Save it for your apprentices, Darrus. They don't know you like I do. They might not realize how much of a hypocrite you are." Her words were cold, but her eyes were still blazing.

A swell of rage rose up in his heart, but Jeht quickly drove it back down. Outwardly, he remained as calm as ever. "I suppose I deserved that, but attacking me won't change anything." His gloves buckled tight, Master Jeht checked his lightsaber and blaster before turning to face Devan completely. "And you are wrong to call anyone my apprentice. I don't have any business teaching anymore."

He gestured to the hall behind him, a passageway Master Devan knew well

as it led to the Academy's hanger and spaceport. "The Jedi assembling down there are just Jedi now. No Padawans, no learners. Right now, the Clone Wars allows only two kinds - - knights and younglings." He stared into her eyes and felt a moment of cool satisfaction as she flinched. "Almas is fortunate the Council is leaving you the latter." And with that, he spun on a leather-booted heel and started to walk away.

It was everything she could do, and more effort than she could safely muster, but Devan managed to climb out of bed and reach the ebon-robed Jedi Master before he stepped completely out of her room. "Jeht... Darrus," her voice was still rough from the injuries she had suffered at the hands of the Jedi Killer, but it was still loud enough to convey her desperation. "Don't do this!"

He looks down at where her hands, one flesh and blood while the other was shining chrome and steel pistons, clutched at his arm. For a moment, his eyes betrayed a flicker of the compassion she was trying to appeal to, but then it vanished. "Master Devan, I am not doing anything. The Council has ordered that all Jedi report to strategic locations for reassignment and military commissions. High-ranking positions are set aside for Almas's Jedi. It is really quite an honor."

She almost slapped him for that, and he could see it in her eyes. In truth, he would have preferred she had done so. It could have matched the slap he actually had received an hour earlier when he told the Academy's other female Master the same news. For a moment, that Master had almost become the Black Queen she once was, but then her anger faded. Jeht knew that in time, Devan's would as well.

Instead, she tried something else. "Darrus, has Lanius been told about this... 'honor'?" He could see in her eyes the hope she was clinging to as tightly as she was his arm. If Lanius was not informed yet, perhaps the Academy's Headmaster could overrule or at least delay the Council's decision.

"I'm sorry, Master Devan. I delivered the order to him the moment I arrived on Almas. He has pledged whatever support the Academy can give." He could see the hope dying in her gaze, her entire expression falling even as her strength failed her. Though she probably hated him for it, Darrus gently carried her back to bed.

He started to walk off without a word, but as he reached the door he glanced back. "Your condition gives you a temporary reprieve from these marching orders, Master Devan, though I fully expect you are opting for the same choice Master Lanius and the rest of the Academy staff have made personally."

He paused at the doorframe, knowing that as soon as his words sank in, she would ask him what he meant. He did not have to wait long.

"What... what choice?"

"The Right of Denial, of course. I would beg you to reconsider, but I doubt you would hear me. I will be on my ship, awaiting the last of the Jedi here... or their lightsabers." He sighed deeply before continuing out into the hall. "Goodbye, Devan."

She was too stunned to respond. The Right of Denial was an almost unheard-of act, one that in these dark times could almost be seen as treason. It was a Jedi tradition, though, and if Lanius had invoked it for himself, could she actually bring herself not to do the same?

She buried her head in her hands, feeling the brush of cold metal on her left cheek, as Master Jeht's sharp footfalls vanished into the distance. She had so hoped things would get better in the Cularin system after the fall of the Jedi Killer, but now things seemed so much worse.

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Twenty-four hours later, Master Jeht's ship, the Maelstrom, passed a pair of Republic battle cruisers on their way into the system. The first cruiser hailed him and, though deeply concerned with the morale and concerns of his Jedi cargo, Darrus took the hail immediately.

The clone commander in charge of the cruiser snapped to attention on his viewscreen. "Sir, the cruisers Reliant and Devout await your command. Are we cleared to proceed?"

Darrus blinked for a moment, but tried not to let his surprise show. He was not expecting any other ships to enter this part of space, especially after the Senate's previous refusals to send support vessels to aid Cularin. Instead of communicating his confusion, he chose a more neutral tone and simply replied, "Your orders?"

"To move into the system and secure it under martial law as dictated by the Emergency Powers Act, general. Without an active Jedi Academy, this system cannot be allowed to remain unprotected. Sir."

Darrus nodded, though inwardly he was shocked. Martial law? How could that be? Surely it was not legal, even under the EPA, to place a star system with active Senate leadership under military control.

"And this system's Senator - - Lavina Wren?"

The clone soldier nodded sharply and didn't miss a breath before responding. "Senator Wren is currently under investigation concerning allegations of seditious behavior and collusion with the Separatists." After a moment's pause, he continued. "The Grand Chancellor has gone on record in support of the Senator and has expressed his assurance that such charges are utterly baseless, but while the investigation continues, this system needs military protection more than ever."

Darrus sank deeper into thought, wondering just what was going on here. What was he seeing? Was a pattern emerging from all this? And if so, what image did it form? Trying to focus his mind, Master Jeht recalled his mentor's teachings and tried desperately to find the shatterpoint here - - the point at which everything was breaking down.

His concentration was broken before he could finish. "Sir? Do we proceed?"

Darrus sighed and nodded. There was nothing else he could do. If the Senator was compromised, and many of the system's Jedi leaving Cularin with him, these worlds would need all the defense they could get. He hated the idea of martial law, but with so many planets already under military command, it was really only a matter of time before Cularin followed suit. Better now, with troops he knew and for a better reason than most. The Chancellor knew what he was doing; Jeht had to keep believing that.

"The order is given, commander. You may proceed. But Almas is to be left alone. It will be under my personal authority. No troops should land there, and its air space must be left alone to expedite my return."

The clone trooper did not hesitate. "As you command."

Once the transmission ended and his own troopers went back to their various tasks around the bridge, Jeht whispered under his breath, "It's the best I can do, Lanius. It's the best I can do."